**Cyber-Bullying Awareness and Response**

What is Cyberbullying? This is the question being asked of all users of the internet who access communication between individuals. It is an especially important topic for educators. The Department of Health and Human Resources defines cyberbullying, “Cyberbullying is when children or teens bully each other using the Internet, mobile phones or other cyber technology. Cyberbullying, which is sometimes referred to as online social cruelty or electronic bullying”

(US Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.). i-Safe America, a leader in internet safety education, reports that cyberbullying is occurring to and by young people at an alarming rate. 42 percent report being bullied online and 53 percent report having said something hurtful online.

Research indicates that our kids spend approximately 31 hours a week online. This fact alone indicates the necessity to address the topic of awareness and response to the topic of cyberbullying.

The bullying can occur in different ways to include using mean text in email or text messages, posting inappropriate pictures or messages in social networking sites and using anonymous names to spread rumors and lies. It often begins as verbal confrontations and then easily escalates to the online world where rapid transmission of threats and harassments can take place.

Sameer Hinduja and Justin Patchin from the Cyberbullying Research Center have been researching the issue of cyberbullying and developing preventative measures. They have composed a list of the Top 10 Tips for Educators that can be used to help prevent cyberbullying.

Included in the Top Ten Tips for Educators:

* Teach students that all forms of bullying are unacceptable
* Specify clear rules
* Create a comprehensive formal contract
* Implement blocking/filtering software
* Educate the community
* Designate a “Cyberbullying Expert”

Hinduja & Patchin (2009)

In addressing the list it is important for educators to address cyberbullying in an open and informative manner with students just as we do with any other concept to be taught. Students need to understand that there are “cyberrules” that should be followed online and as with any other inappropriate behavior there are consequences. It is essential to continually remind students that they are not anonymous on a computer and that it is easy to track cyberbullying behaviors.

Clear rules that are written and posted for students, parents and the community make it clear that school districts take cyberbullying very seriously. This has been made clear in the Liberty Hill ISD Acceptable Use Policy which states in the personal responsibility section, “I will participate in lessons about appropriate online behavior, including interacting with other individuals on social networking websites and in chat rooms and cyberbullying awareness and response”. Liberty Hill ISD, (2010). This indicates an on-going process of education by the district. It also serves as notification to the community about the policy on cyberbullying. However, additional opportunities to educate the community should be made available to encourage open discussions and communication of the policy to all stakeholders. Even, though parents and students sign the document yearly, too often it is just another beginning of the year form that is signed blindly.

Currently in Texas specific laws regarding cyberbullying do not exist but fall under abuse on school property only. The Texas legislature has passed the “online harassment” law, which states that people who post fake profiles on social networking sites, such as Facebook or MySpace, with the intent to “harm, defraud, intimidate or threaten” other people would be charged with a felony. There is still broad interpretation of this law but schools should take notice and begin to address it with students as part of the Acceptable Use Policies of the district.

Cyberbullying is the newest for of inappropriate school behavior and the impact it too often underestimated by all. Education on awareness and response to cyberbullying is the responsibility of everyone. Texas Attorney General, Greg Abbott, is urging all parents and teachers to realize the risks our children face online, and take steps to help ensure their children’s safety.

**Citations**

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